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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the current status, what principals and teachers think, and the impact on student achievement of the Writing To Read Program (a computer-assisted literacy program designed to teach young children to read through their own writing) in the Memphis, Tennessee, City Schools. Surveys were sent to the 14 elementary schools that implemented the program in kindergarten and first-grade classrooms in the 1996-97 school year. Results indicated that: (1) principals were split in their perceptions of the program's impact; (2) the trend among Writing To Read school achievement test results was toward no change or negative change; and (3) only 2 of the 14 schools actually implemented the program as described. Findings suggest that, in the absence of consistent increases in reading, the program should be abandoned as a district level initiative to encourage schools to seek alternative and more effective programs. Appendixes contain the survey form, a summary spreadsheet of school responses, and school responses to open-ended questions. (RS)

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The *Writing To Read* Program in the Memphis City Schools Spring, 1997

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The *Writing To Read* Program
in the Memphis City Schools
Spring, 1997

Introduction

The *Writing To Read* program has been present in the Memphis City Schools since 1984. The oldest programs still in continuous use are at Charjean Elementary and Manor Lake Elementary, where *Writing To Read* began in 1984. The newest program was started at LaRose Elementary in 1995. A survey was conducted in early 1997 to gather information about the program, with the intention of answering these questions:

1. What is the current status of the program?
2. What do principals and teachers think about the program?

Additional analysis of individual school and district reading scores was conducted to answer a third question:

3. What impact has the program had on student achievement in reading scores over a period of time within each participating school, and also in comparison with non- *Writing To Read* schools?

Program Description

Writing To Read was designed by Dr. John Henry Martin and developed by IBM for release in 1984. *Writing To Read* is a computer assisted literacy program designed to teach young children to read through their own writing. Children learn to write what they can say, and read what they can write. The program is arranged in a learning center environment. At the computer center, cycle words teach young children sound/letter relationships. Four other centers support and encourage children to practice these associations using a variety of different activities, including work journals, manipulatives, books and writing. The program was designed to be implemented in a specifically prescribed time frame of one-hour daily sessions all year for first graders, and one-hour daily, second semester sessions for kindergarteners. The program was revised in 1991 with the creation of *Writing To Read 2000,* which features enhanced graphics and methodology. Currently five of the 14 Memphis schools are using *Writing To Read 2000.*

Before the program was originally released, an extensive two year study was conducted by Educational Testing Service (ETS), involving 10,000 children at the kindergarten and first grade levels in 28 school sites. The researchers concluded that while there is evidence that *Writing To Read* had a powerful impact on the learning of the children, they add that results indicate the program works best with white, on-or-above grade-level students.

Discussion

1. What is the current status of the program?

A review of MCS School Profiles, as well as financial data summarizing schools receiving district funds for *Writing To Read*, indicated that there are 14 elementary schools currently using the program. All school programs are implemented at both the kindergarten and first grade levels, with the exception of Keystone Elementary, where only kindergarten classes receive the program, and South Park, where only first graders receive it. The schools reported approximately 2647 children received the program in 1996-97, which is a decline of 8% from the 2873 served in 1995-96.

Schools used various time patterns for student attendance in the labs. Five schools reported daily attendance for 45 minute periods. Three schools reported daily attendance by kindergarteners for one semester and daily attendance by first graders for a full year. Two schools reported once a week attendance, two schools reported daily attendance for a week, with these segments interspersed throughout the year. One school reported usage for a semester, and another school reported use three times a week all year. These varied implementation patterns are a contrast to the recommended pattern of one-hour daily sessions all year for first graders, and one-hour daily sessions for the second semester for kindergarteners. *Writing To Read* was not the sole language arts program in any of the reporting schools.

Schools were asked to report the number of full time and part time staff funded by *Writing To Read* who were serving the program. The responses were as follows:

1995-96			1996-97		
No Staff	Full Time	Part Time	No Staff	Full Time	Part Time
4	1	9	3	3	8

Schools were asked if they had a *Writing To Read* lab, if they purchased supplies for the lab, and how much they spent annually on the supplies. Three schools reported they did not have a lab. The funding pattern for lab supplies was as follows:

	1995-96			1996-97		
Schools spending	$0	up to $500	over $500	$0	up to $500	over $500
	6	2	6	7	3	4

Specific school responses to these questions may be found in Appendix B: Summary Spreadsheet. The survey form may be found in Appendix A.

2. What do principals and teachers think about the program?

Schools were asked to rate the impact they thought the *Writing To Read* program had on student learning by choosing a number between 1 (negligible impact) and 10 (significant impact). The responses were evenly divided; eight of the 14 schools chose an "8," "9" or a "10," while the other six chose "3," "2" or no response.

When asked specifically, "What impact have you been able to see on your students," ten positive comments concerned academic skills and two comments noted increased social skills related to cooperative learning. Three comments were negative and one was non-commital (e.g., "Impact reported from high to minimal.").

The most frequent response to question 3: "What evidence of this impact can you reference," was the listing of specific word and sound skills acquired (six comments), followed by skills at composing stories (five comments), third grade testing gains (two comments), increased student pleasure in writing (one comment) and improved computer skills (one comment).

Principals also were asked if they felt the program impact had changed over the years. Responses were again evenly divided, with six schools answering "No," six answering "Yes" and two not responding. Of the six "Yes" responses, three stated the impact changed because the program was used less, and three attributed the change to other school changes, such as the advent of *WTR 2000*, the increase in whole language usage and moving *Writing To Read* from lab to classroom.

Finally, the last question asked principals for other comments concerning the benefits or limitations on the program at their school. The following responses were offered:

(n=4) * The program needs to be upgraded
(n=2) * WTR is not well-utilized
(n=1) * WTR is too slow to hold student interest
(n=1) * WTR is valuable as an individualization tool
(n=1) * WTR is a valuable first introduction to computers for many children.

3. What impact has the program had on student achievement in reading and total language scores over a period of time within each participating school, and also in comparison with non-*Writing To Read* schools?

The impact of the *Writing To Read* program was addressed by graphing the progression over several years of the TCAP Reading scores of a cohort group at each participating school, and comparing each school with average district scores for the same cohort group. For example, it was assumed that second graders (where TCAP testing begins) in 1991 would have participated in *Writing To Read* in kindergarten and first grade. This group of second graders became the cohort group that was followed through the most current scores. (1996) These second graders were third graders in 1992, fourth graders in 1993, fifth graders in 1994 and sixth graders in 1995. The TCAP reading scores for this cohort group at each participating school were plotted and graphed over the number of years the program was used. Likewise,

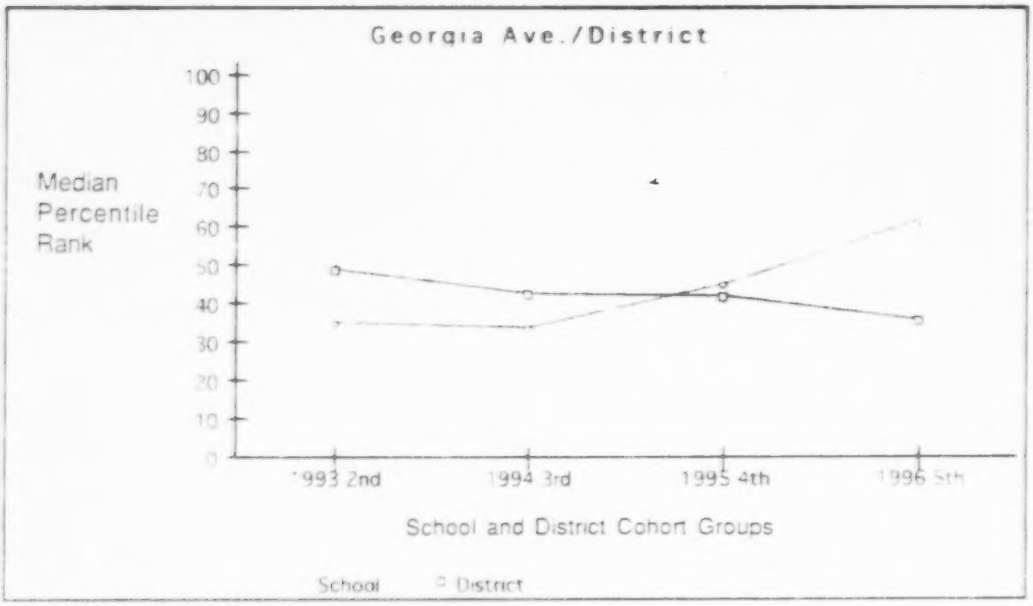
the average reading score of 1991 district second graders was graphed across the same years, revealing a picture of district reading performance. The comparison between individual school performance and district performance was made for each of the participating schools, with the exceptions of LaRose, where *Writing To Read* began in 1995.

The school outcomes fell into the following four categories:

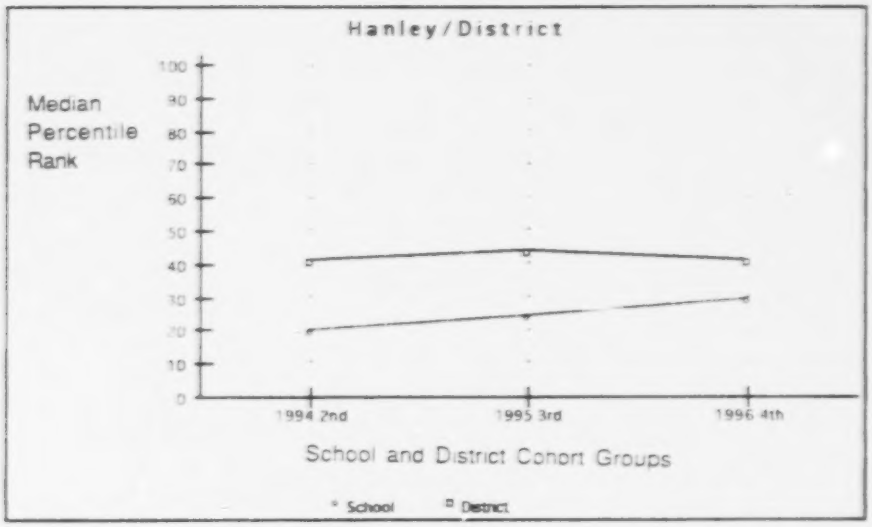
1. Rising Reading Scores: Schools (n=2) in which performance of the cohort group rose over the course of several years.
2. Slight Change: Schools (n=5) in which performance of the cohort group did not rise or fall more than five points over the course of several years.
3. Sporadic Change: Schools (n=3) in which the performance of the cohort group rose and fell over the course of several years.
4. Falling Reading Scores: Schools (n=4) in which performance of the cohort group fell over the course of several years.

1. Rising Reading Scores

a. The *Writing To Read* program at Georgia Ave. school began in 1992. Data were plotted for the 1993 school year. Reading scores began lower than district scores, and dramatically rose during the graphed period. The responses to the open-ended questions are very positive and affirm the program as highly motivating.

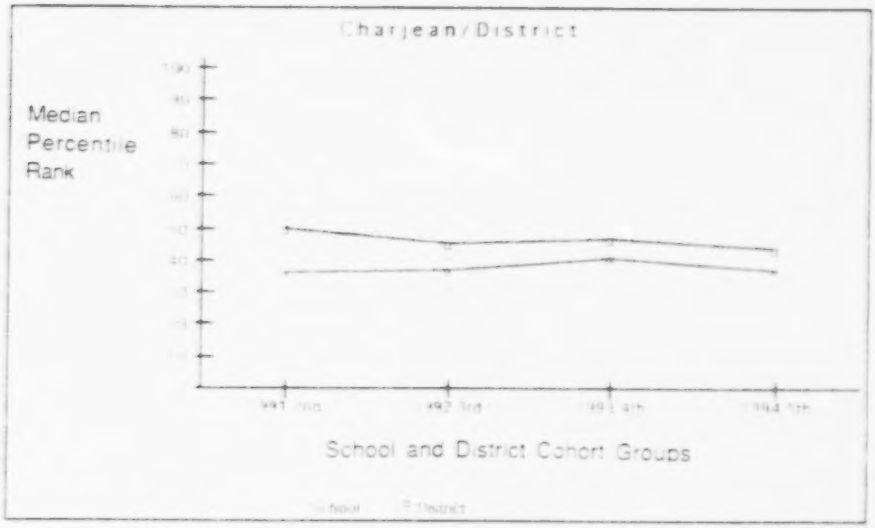


b. The comparison between scores at Hanley and district scores cover a three-year period. The three-year progression shows a steady positive gain.



2. Slight Change

Five schools displayed patterns that exhibited fewer than five points of positive or negative change. These schools are Charjean, Lester, Kansas, Richland and South Park. (Scores for South Park school end with the 5th grade, since the school has no 6th grade.) *Writing To Read* **began before 1990 in these schools. Programs at three of these schools are the oldest in the district (Charjean, 1984; Lester, 1985; Kansas, 1985)**



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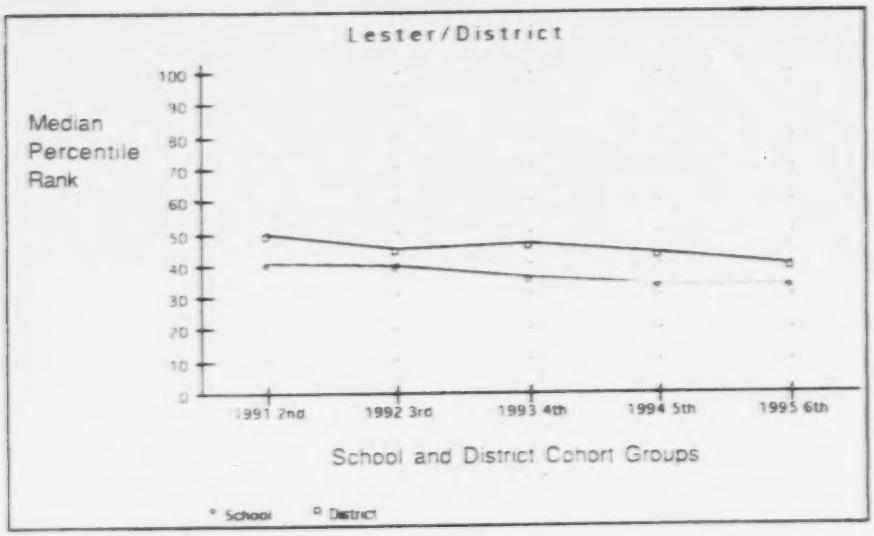

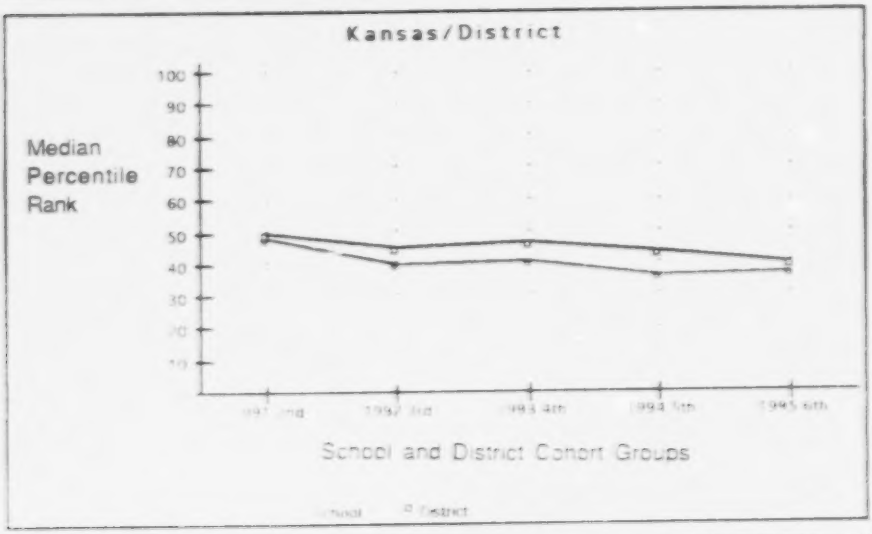

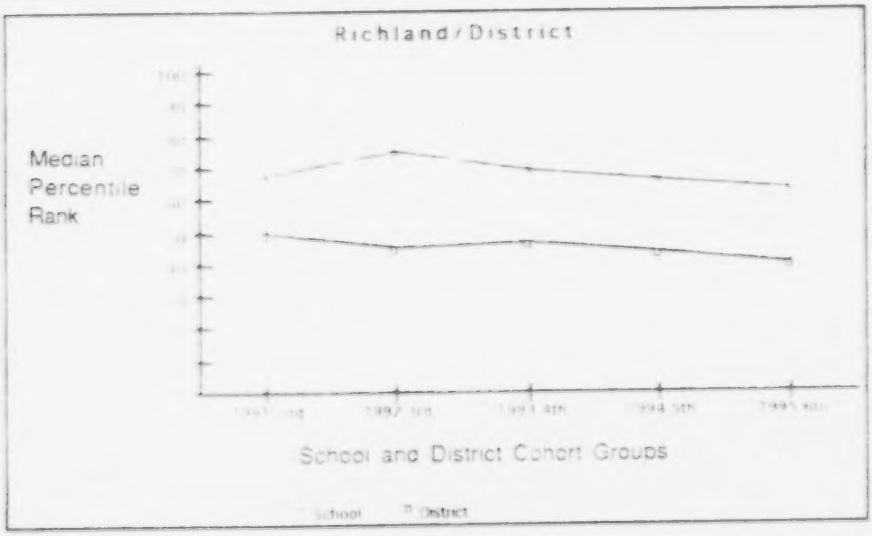

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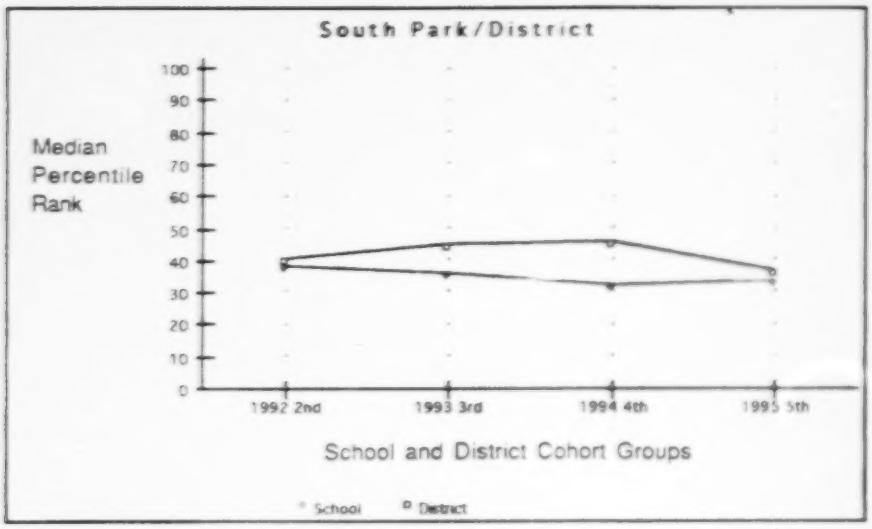
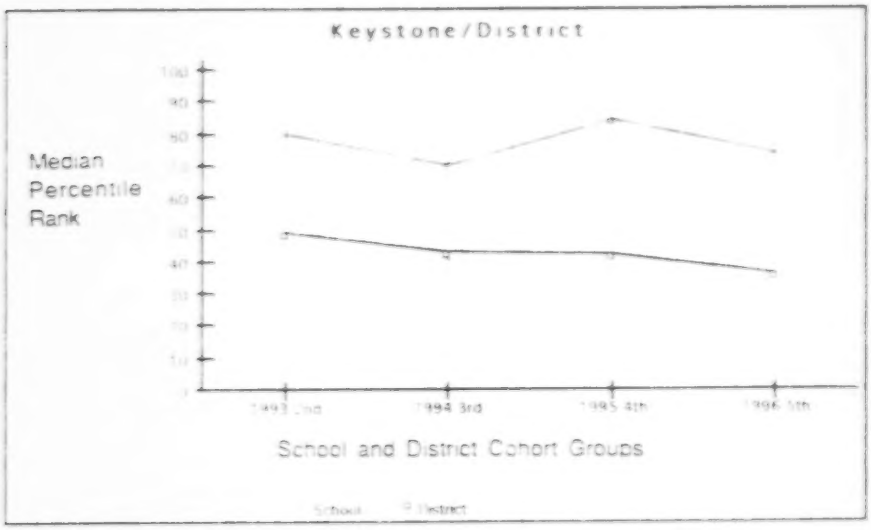
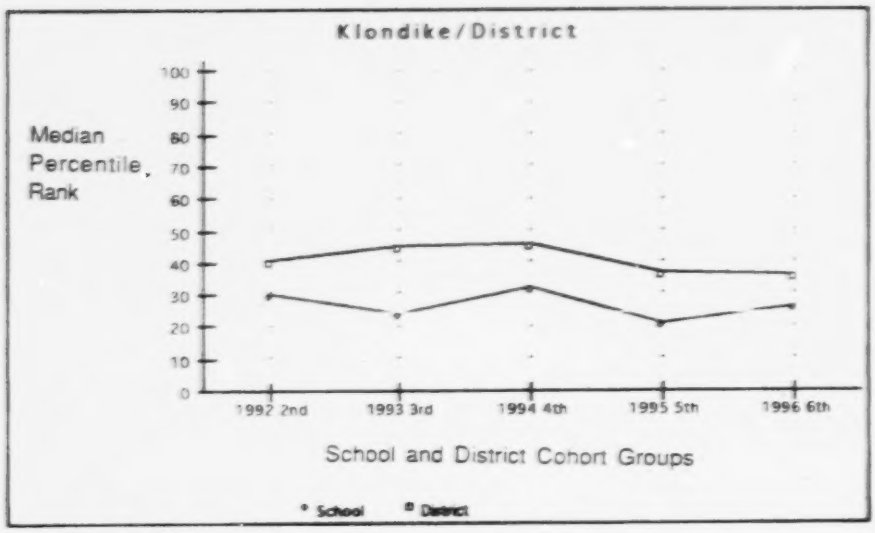
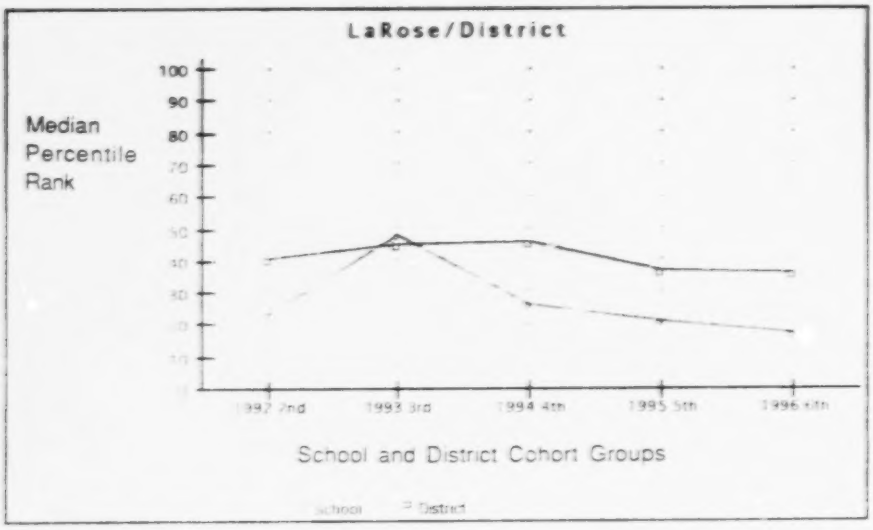


3. Sporadic Change

Three schools displayed patterns that showed scores temporarily rising and falling, but essentially returning close to the initial performance level. In one school (Keystone), the reading performance was consistently above the district, while performance at Klondike was below. Scores at LaRose rose during one particular year, only to fall the following year.







4. Falling Reading Scores

The school/district comparisons at four schools display falling reading scores over time. These schools are Gordon, Guthrie, Manor Lake and Hamilton.

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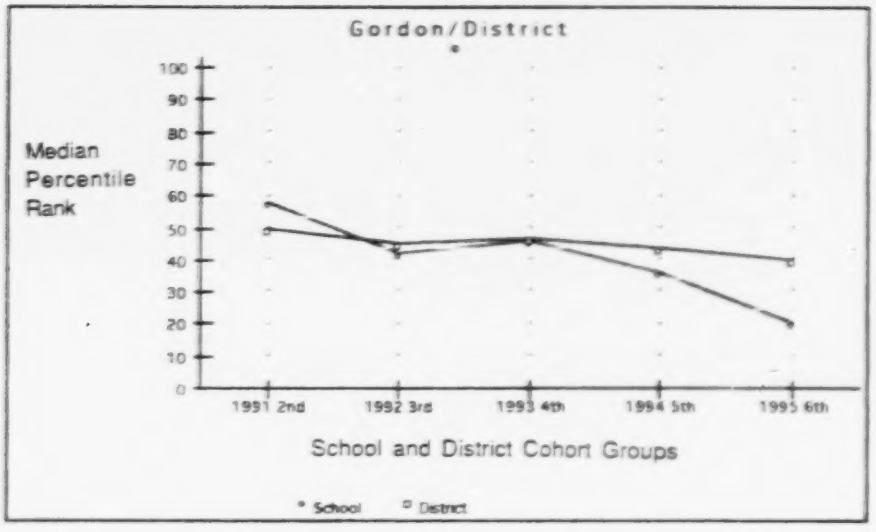

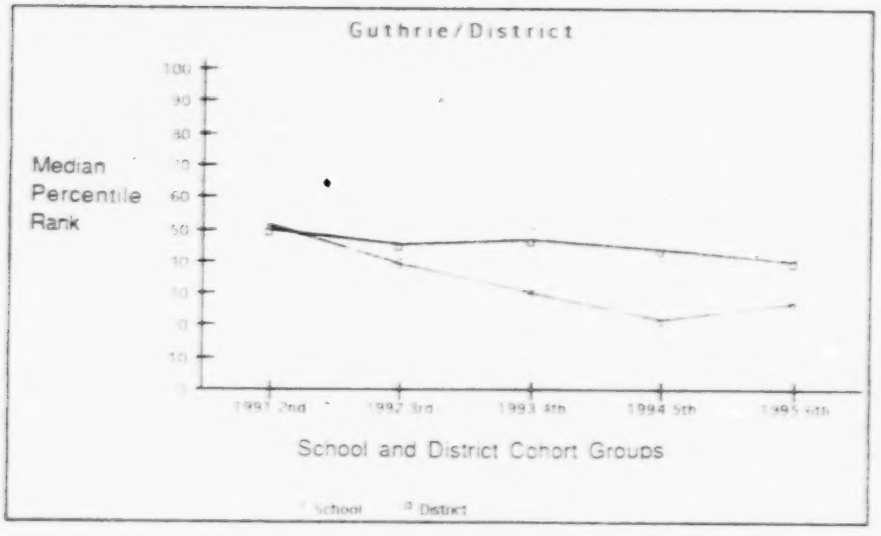

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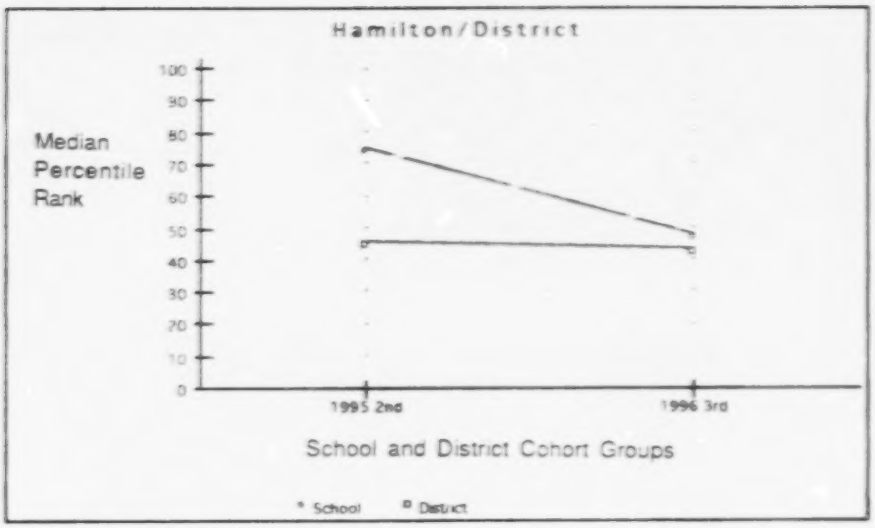
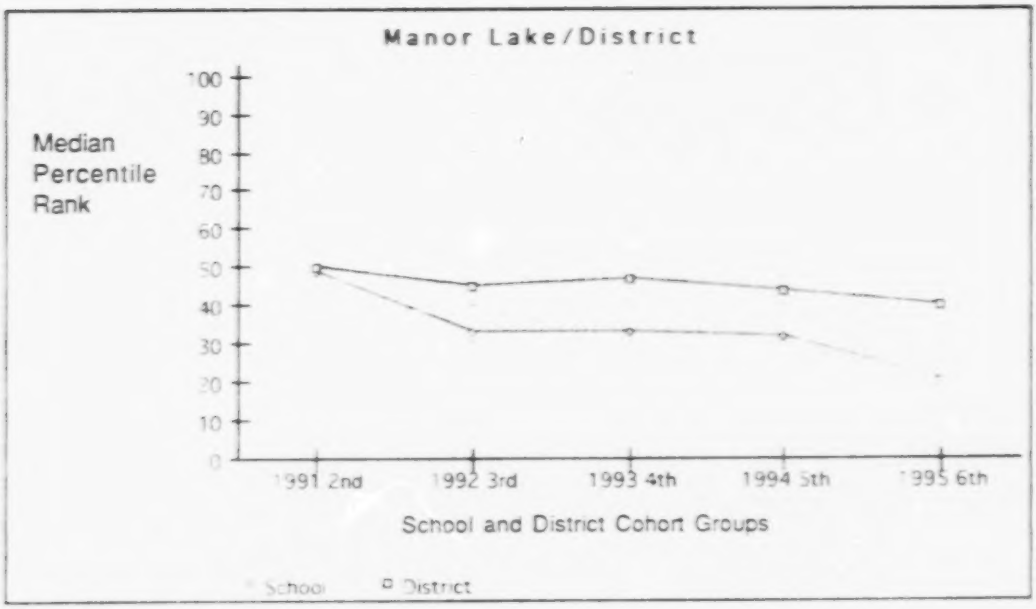

Hamilton/District
Median Percentile Rank
100
90
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
1995 2nd
1996 3rd
School and District Cohort Groups
School
District


Manor Lake/District
Median Percentile Rank
100
90
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
1991 2nd
1992 3rd
1993 4th
1994 5th
1995 6th
School and District Cohort Groups
School
District

Conclusions

The information gathered in this report does not point to any clear impact on schools by the *Writing To Read* program. The principals were split in their perceptions of the program's impact, with eight principals declaring high impact, and six declaring minimal impact. The trend among *Writing To Read* school achievement test results was toward no change or negative change, with only two schools displaying rising scores (14%), four schools displaying falling scores (29%), and eight schools displaying little or sporadic movement in either direction (57%). Overall, the absence of consistent increases in reading suggests that it should be abandoned, at least as a district level initiative, in order to encourage schools to seek alternative and more effective programs.

A major caution should be noted in reaching conclusions about the effectiveness of the *Writing To Read* program in the Memphis City Schools. Since only two of the 14 schools actually implemented the model as prescribed, it is not possible to determine consistent patterns of standard performances from *Writing To Read* at its optional level of execution. In this context, level of implementation is a *de facto* variable for which there were no controls in this evaluation.

However, if the decision is made by individual schools to continue offering *Writing To Read,* the following recommendations should be considered:

1. A review of the implementation plans at the two schools displaying rising test scores (Hanley and Georgia Ave.) would be useful for determining what is happening at these schools that may have contributed to the steady rise in test scores, and could be replicated.

2. An articulation of the relationship of *Writing To Read* to the MCS standards should be conducted to ensure that the WTR program promotes higher-level thinking skills.

3. An examination at the individual school level of the adequacy of the technology used for *Writing To Read* will ensure consistent technology planning at the school level.

4. A professional development plan to support *Writing To Read* should be pursued at individual schools to promote prescribed use of the program and intended outcomes.

Appendices

Appendix A: Survey Form
Appendix B: School Responses: Summary Spreadsheet
Appendix C: School Responses: Open-Ended Questions

Appendix A: Survey Form

Appendix B: School Responses: Summary Spreadsheet

Appendix C: School Responses: Open-Ended Questions

Memphis City Schools
***Writing To Read* Survey**

_____ _____
School Principal

_____ _____
Date Name of person completing this survey

I Project History

1. Have you ever used the *Writing To Read* program at your school?

_____ yes _____no

If your answer is "yes," please continue; if "no," the return of this survey is requested.

2. What year did the *Writing To Read* program begin in your school?

_____

3. For the current school year (1996-97):

a. How many children are being (or will be) served by the WTR program?_____

b. At what grade levels do (or will) the children use the program?

_____

_____

c. How long does each group of children use the program?

_____ week _____semester _____other:_____

_____

d. Staffing: How many staff members are funded by WTR to serve the program?

Number of Full Time_____ Number of Part Time_____

e. Is WTR the sole Language Arts instructional program for K-1?

_____ yes _____no

If "no," what other Language Arts programs are used with the students?

_____

_____

f. Lab: Do you have a *Writing To Read* lab? _____

Do you annually purchase supplies to stock the lab? _____

How much did you spend on supplies?_____

4. For the school year 1995-96:

a. How many children were served by the WTR program?_____

b. At what grade levels did the children use the program?

_____

_____

c. How long did each group of children use the program?

_____ week _____semester _____other:_____

_____

d. Staffing: How many staff members were funded by WTR to serve the program?

Number of Full Time_____ Number of Part Time_____

e. Was WTR the sole Language Arts instructional program for K-1?

_____ yes _____no

If "no," what other Language Arts programs were used with the students?

_____

f. Lab: Did you have a *Writing To Read* lab? _____
Did you purchase supplies to stock the lab? _____

How much did you spend on supplies?_____

II Project Impact

1. Circle the number which best indicates the impact you feel the *Writing to Read* program has or had on student learning:

Significant				Some impact					Negligible
10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

2. What impact have you been able to see on your students?

3. What evidence of this impact can you reference?

4. Has the program impact changed over the years? If so, in what ways?

5. Any other comments concerning benefits or limitations of the *Writing To Read* program at your school:

Return by March 4, 1997 to Recardo V. Sockwell, BOE, Rm. 120

1996-97

School	Year Began	WTR 2000?	Impact #	How long?	96-#kids	grades	Staff/full	Staff/PT	sole LA?	other?	lab?	yearly buy?	how much $?
Charjean	1984	no	2	k/2x-1/3xweek	150	k&1	no	1	no	S For A	no	no	0
Georgia Ave.	1992	no	8	one year	181	k&1	no	1	no	basal reader	yes	yes	900
Gordon	1986	no	9	k=sem/1=yr	250	k&1	no	no	no	whl.lang.	yes	no	0
Guthrie	1990	no	8	45 min/day	194	k&1	1	no	no	SforA;R&W	yes	yes	1300
Hamilton	1992	no	3	k=sem/1=yr	260	k&1	no	no	no	whl.lg./basal	no	no	0
Hanley	1994	no	3	1 hr daily/96-97	248	k&1	no	2	no	Heath Literc	yes	no	0
Kansas	1985	yes - 1995	9	week/45 m. day	136	k&1	1	no	no	S for A	yes	yes	0
Keystone	1992	no	0	1day/wk;sem2	95	K	no	no	no		no		0
Klondike	1990	yes - 1996	8	k:sem2;1:all yr.	133	k&1	no	1	no	SforA;Peabo	yes	as needed	$500.00
LaRose	1995	yes - 1995	5	1 semester	210	k&1	no	1	no	S for A	yes	yes	0
Lester	1985		0	1st gr-all year	295	k&1	2	no	no	Sling;LitB	yes	yes	1500
Manor Lake	1984	yes - 1995	10	week*	185	k&1	no	1	no	SforA;R&W	yes	yes	174
Richland	1985	yes - 1996	10	k=sem/1=yr	225	k&1	no	1	no	Lipincot;basa	yes	yes	$150.00
South Park	1989	no	10	45m./day;all yr.	85	1	no	1	no	Har.B/H.Mif	yes	yes	200

1995-96

School	Year Began	WTR 2000?	Impact #	How long?	95-# kids	grades	95/full	95/PT	sole LA?	other?	lab?	yearly buy?	how much $?
Charjean	1984	no	2	k/2x-1/3xweek	150	k & 1	no	1	no	S for A	yes	yes	654
Georgia Ave.	1992	no	8	one year	219	k & 1	no	1	no	basal reader	yes	yes	1300
Gordon	1986	no	9	k=sem/1=yr	272	k &1	no	0	no	whl.lang.	yes	no	0
Guthrie	1990	no	8	45 min/day	188	k & 1	1	0	no	Harct.Brace	yes	yes	1170
Hamilton	1992	no	3	k=sem/1=yr	260	k & 1	no	0	no	whl.lg./basal	no	no	0
Hanley	1994	no	3	1 hr daily/96-97	255	k - 1	no	2	no	Heath Literc	yes	no	0
Kansas	1985	yes - 1995	9	week/45 m. day	120	k & 1	no	2	no	S for a	yes	yes	0
Keystone	1992	no	0	1day/wk;sem2	95	k	no	0	no		no		0
Klondike	1990	yes - 1996	8	k:sem2;1:all yr.	140	k &1	no	1	no	S for A	yes	no	0
LaRose	1995	yes - 1995	5	1 semester	230	k - 1	no	1	no	S for A	yes	yes	700
Lester	1985		0	1st gr-all year	289	k &1	no	0	no	Sling;LitBase	yes	yes	1500
Manor Lake	1984	yes - 1995	10	week*	200	k &1	no	1	no	SforA;R&W	yes	yes	764
Richland	1985	yes - 1996	10	k=sem/1=yr	300	k &1	no	1	no	Lipincot;basa	yes	yes	150
South Park	1989	no	10	45m./day;all yr.	155	k & 1	no	1	no	Harct.Brace-	yes	yes	300

Memphis City Schools
***Writing To Read* Survey**
OPEN ENDED QUESTIONS

2. What impact have you been able to see on your students?
The program provides students the opportunity to learn basic computer skills and to work on skills related to alphabet recognition and beginning sounds and reading readiness.-GUTHRIE

Limited impact on student achievement. - CHARJEAN

Students learn all phonetic sounds in the program when properly implemented. Testing in the past indicated that students made better scores if they had finished WTR program.-LESTER

Writing to Read creates a setting for students to work together in cooperative learning teams. The social skills practiced at the 5 work stations teach students to take turns, listen to one another, help each other and complete each task as a team. -MANOR LAKE

Most of the students are able to sound out words and spell them. They are able to write detailed and organized stories. They have developed a positive attitude for writing. -SOUTH PARK

WTR reinforces and supports our reading program. The students are becoming computer literate and are learning keyboarding skills. The students' confidence level in writing has improved. -KLONDIKE

Teachers are very discouraged and not using it as much this year.-KEYSTONE

The Writing to Read program has enabled students to become better readers. It also helps the students to feel comfortable when writing. Students can demonstrate the use of the keyboard and use of special keys. They can identify the need for data to be organized.-GORDON

The Writing to Read program has helped to develop the writing and reading skills of many kindergarten and first grade students. By using the learning centers in the lab, the students have learned to use a variety of equipment and language arts materials. Students show tremendous development of converting their speech to writing. Writing to read has been a great help in teaching students how to write what they say and learning to read what they write.-KANSAS

A polling of the teachers indicates the impact from minimal to high in some skill areas.-HAMILTON

Students have confidence in their ability to write. They are eager to go to the WTR lab. Students seek assistance from their peers while working at the different stations. They are highly motivated and enjoy the multi-sensory activities.-GEORGIA AVE.

This program helped students to identify letters and letter sounds. This program also helped create a risk free environment for writing. -HANLEY

Very little impact except that it has helped some with writing. - LAROSE

Writing To Read helps with learning sounds and letters which help with reading/writing and other language arts areas. -RICHLAND

3. What <u>evidence</u> of this impact can you reference?
Identifying initial consonant sounds. Recognition of uppercase and lowercase letters, and matching uppercase and lowercase letters. Students are composing, writing and typing their own stories. Computer literate.- GUTHRIE

Third graders showed significant gains in testing done through IBM program as compared to higher level students who were not treated in the program.-LESTER

The Writing to Read computer program reenforces basic word attack skills and oral language. Students practice sounding out long and short vowel sounds, identifying alphabets and writing short complete sentences. They continue by writing short stories on their own. These skills are transferred to the regular classroom setting.-MANOR LAKE

When some of the students began the program, they were unable to spell words or form sentences. Now the majority of them are able to write complete stories.-SOUTH PARK

Students' writings are excellent evidence of the positive impact of WTR. Students can read more words with less help. The students have begun to spell more words. Students recognize the words in stories and begin writing them during other writing activities.-KLONDIKE

Near the beginning of second semester first grade participants are able to write one or two short paragraphs on a given topic, using minimal temporary spellings. Word processing skills are used when students publish their stories.-GEORGIA AVE.

Teachers' observations of student response.-HAMILTON

Student classroom writings: students (kindergarten) come into the Writing to Read lab without knowledge of how to write or spell words. With the help of the computers and different learning centers, these very same students learn how to write words from sounds, spell them, form simple sentences and write stories. By first grade, with a continuation of the program, these students can write more advanced stories. Many writings are within the lab.-KANSAS

Teachers see improved writing and reading skills. Students show more efficient use of keyboarding skills.-GORDON

Better testing grades for most students. -HANLEY

Students enjoy writing more and we feel they are better readers because of the program. -RICHLAND

4. Has the program impact changed over the years? If so, in what ways?
With more emphasis being placed on whole language learning, the WTR program has been used to stress phonics and build a bridge between the two programs. Some programs such as Bouncy Bee, Touch Typing for Beginners, and other programs are no longer available in our system.-GUTHRIE

No.-CHARJEAN

Still effective when appropriately implemented.-LESTER

No, Writing to Read has not changed in any way. The program is still basically the same. The students are assigned to 5 stations. They are the computer station, work journal station, writing station, clay and make words stations.-MANOR LAKE

No.-SOUTH PARK

No.-KLONDIKE

Yes; it is used less and teachers feel it is limited.-KEYSTONE

In the 95-96 school year the Writing to Read programs for 1st grade students was changed from a lab setting to a classroom setting. The 96-97 school year the Writing to Read program was placed in the classroom for some kindergarten students also.-GORDON

The program's impact has gradually changed over the years in that in the past two years an expanded form of the program (Writing to Read 2000) has been added to the program. This addition has given the students access to more materials to work with especially in their work journals. The students are learning more attentiveness and organization by using the program.-KANSAS

Most teachers feel the impact has remained the same.-HAMILTON

Participants are still highly motivated and eager to come to the WTR lab.-GEORGIA AVE

Yes, because for the last two years we have been unable to get the basic components for this program. -HANLEY

There is no training for new teachers or update training for other teachers. -LAROSE

Writing To Read continues to be a vital part of our language arts program. -RICHLAND

5. Any other comments concerning benefits or limitations of the *Writing To Read* program at your school:

We need to be upgraded because of the new reading program; need to be upgraded with the proper software, and we need software for students not writing or learning our skills.-GUTHRIE

Because of limited classroom space, the WTR lab was developed into a first grade classroom because of an increase in enrollment. A modified version of WTR is now being implemented in the classrooms because the computers are not networked.-CHARJEAN

There is a need for computers in the classroom so students could do more writing. Updated equipment would be beneficial. More lab time per week would be beneficial. There is a need for a full-time computer technician.-KLONDIKE

This lab is not being well utilized and at this time it is the only exposure kindergarten has to computers.-KEYSTONE

The program allows students to use higher level thinking skills, promotes cooperative learning and individualized instruction.-GEORGIA AVE.

The teachers commented that the program is too slow moving and did not hold student interest.-HAMILTON

The Writing to Read program has been a great success here at Kansas. This program has been mostly the students first experience with the alphabetic principle. Knowledge gained from usage of the computers and other equipment in the lab has been good.-KANSAS

We would like to update both labs K and 1st with new software and work journals.-HANLEY

Our WTR lab has very hold IBM PC Jr's. We desperately need to have it upgraded. We also need tapes and software in addition to tape recorders and headsets. We would love to have Writing To Write. -RICHLAND